

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

"INACTION — ACTION — REACTION"


**"Why was this perfume not sold for
thirty pounds and given to the poor?"
John 12:5**

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John 12:5

"Why was this perfume not sold for thirty pounds and given to the poor?" (John 12:5) Those words, in St. John's Gospel, are attributed to Judas. There are many points worth reflecting on in this story of Jesus' visit to the home of Simon the leper in Bethany. The obvious delight that Jesus found in the company of plain people. The intuition that Mary had regarding Jesus' pending death and her symbolic anointing of his body. Why should she have sensed this while the twelve did not? The melodramatic touch insured by the presence of Lazarus whom Christ had raised from the dead. We may be certain that he fielded many a question between courses.

However suggestive any of these leads, it is my purpose today to focus on the response that Judas made to Mary's act of generous and spontaneous love. Reclining for the meal, as was the custom, Jesus was approached from behind by one of his hostesses. She broke open a box of costly ointment and proceeded to anoint his head and feet. Judas' response, on the surface, was at once critical and practical: "Why was this perfume not sold for thirty pounds and given to the poor?"

I

Matters were at a standstill before Mary acted. No one, least of all Judas, was thinking of the poor. This was a purely social occasion. Table talk and food were the concerns of the moment. Suddenly and dramatically Mary got matters off dead center. She performed the kind of deed that draws people out and makes them commit themselves pro or con.

Judas' response was negative and grudging. He could only think to counter the initiative of someone else. Psychiatrists would have found Judas an intriguing subject here. Did the woman's guideless act upset the darkening thoughts now clustering in his heart? Did he speak out in defense of a smitten conscience? What connection was there between Mary's deed and Judas' habit of pilfering from the bag?

You're unconvincing Judas! Your profession of concern for the poor does not ring true. It has about it the marks of a pious after-thought, not the stamp of a bonafide passion.

Notice the pattern of this episode. It moves from inaction - to action - to reaction. First nothing is being done — either for Jesus or the poor. Then Mary anoints her Lord. After this Judas indulges in a second guess. Judas thus becomes the proto-type of those whose only contribution to life is to react to what others attempt in good faith. These are the people who never seem to initiate anything. Their only move is a countering move. The best ball player hits the ball every time, throws nothing but strikes and fields his position flawlessly. If only he would put down his hot dog, leave his seat in the grandstand, pull on a uniform and get into the game.

II

We Christians have arrived at the kingdom at a time that calls for bold initiatives and daring experimentation. It is important, therefore, within the framework of this Bethany story, that we choose Mary for our model and not Judas.

There are in particular two areas that seem to me to be unusually critical. Let me introduce them in question form. First, how can we communicate the faith of our fathers in the language of our children? The generation gap really hurts at this point. No parent worth his salt is satisfied simply to provide educational and material benefits for his young. He wants, one would hope, above all else, to have his children join him in common adoration, trust and

service to Almighty God.

But the gulf between the generations seem to widen with every attempt to communicate the faith. We are forced to remember that our youngsters are post-television, post-moonshot, post-cybernetics, post-automation, and post-Vietnam. Wherever we oldsters sit and whatever be the subject of our musing we seem to our young people like a company of fuzzy hoppers having a was-in.

To decide to repeat the words of faith in the same context as that in which we heard them is to lose by default. For our children hear what we say about God within a context that is staggeringly and dramatically different. Helmut Thielicke is helpful when he says: "This is why the gospel must constantly be forwarded to a new address, because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence." 1

The Lutheran church in America took a laudable step forward this past week in the city of Minneapolis by coming up with a long awaited new definition of Confirmation. As of September 1, 1971, in that esteemed tradition, Confirmation will be seen as the entire period from infant baptism to mid-adolescence ending in grade ten when pupils are fifteen or sixteen years old. Confirmation, in this view, is not so much an event as it is a process. The recommending committee went on to suggest that the church should become more keenly aware of the fact that all of the pastoral as well as the educational experiences throughout childhood are confirmation ministry.

If this be true, as indeed it is, then what we do in the way of pastoral and educational ministry during those formative years requires the very best that we can command under God. Along with the traditional methods of communication we must make better and increasing use of creative films and dramatic presentations that speak to the young in their own idiom. Jazz masses and folk services that may not turn us on but somehow have a way of reaching them. Sensitivity training sessions. Role playing in simulated life situations. And membership on important boards and committees within our several congregations.

A few years ago Stan Freburg did a rather daring series of radio spots for the United Presbyterian Church. The spots on the whole were very well received. But there were some fastidious Christians up and down the country, presumably ineffective themselves as communicators of the gospel in a new age, who found these spots offensive. One could only think in the face of their complaints of Dwight L. Moody's response to one of his critics: "At least," said the evangelist, "I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it." 2

The other concern that cries out for experimentation, courage and innovation is the question that I believe most every congregation in the land is wrestling with. How do we translate personal Christian experience into constructive patterns of social action? At the personal level on a one-to-one basis Christians are remarkably imaginative and innovative. Let there be sickness or some other tragedy in one of our hi-rise apartments and one will be amazed at the range of ways in which fellow-tenants respond. At this level we are unbridled and free.

Every so often one sees individuals who chance a break with traditional vocational patterns in order to more graphically express the ministry of Christ in our time. During my years in the city of Ann Arbor I came to know a young doctor who had an unusual sense of public reference to his life and practice. So much was this the case that he sought and won a seat on the city council. In the week just past I learned that this man, some eight years in medicine, has given up this thirty thousand dollar a year income, his modern office equipped with piped-in music and all the latest equipment, in order that he might operate out of a one-story brick house in cramped quarters in an effort to serve the poor. His fees now are on a sliding scale, going all the way down to as low as \$2.00 for an office visit. It is his judgment that poor people are forced to practice crisis medicine, which means that you must get sick as a dog before you see a doctor. This young man and his colleague see some ninety patients a day between eight o'clock in the morning and nine-thirty at night. It is heartening to learn of individuals who combine imagination and the willingness to sacrifice in

the service of others.

But it still remains true that when it comes to moving together as Christians on the massive, social problems of our time we tend like Judas to sit back and second-guess the efforts of other people. It is no secret that our various denominations and the National Council of Churches are being forced to trim their programs because of a cutback in funds. I think it would be fair to say that under ordinary circumstances the thinning of ranks at the upper levels of church life can be salutary and beneficial both to the institution and to men and women temporarily displaced. But I confess publicly that I am troubled by the present situation because over the years denominational headquarters and the National Council of Churches have consistently done more in the way of bold experimentation than most any single, individual congregation in the land. If lowered income means a reduction in creative experimentation, the price that we will all have to pay is greater than most any of us could imagine.

Carlyle Marney was telling me one night about the time when the veteran Methodist Manning Potts was on a Virginia platform attempting to answer the criticisms of some disturbed rightists. They threw at Dr. Potts that old saw about Communism in the National Council of Churches. Dr. Potts asked, "How many here participate in Social Security? How many here belong to a labor union? How many here have life insurance? How many here have child labor laws? How many here know anything about civil protection of rights? How many here have ever drawn workmen's compensation?" Then he claimed that every one of them had its ideological origin and early impetus in either the old Federal Council or the contemporary National Council wherein in forty years he had never seen a Communist.

We have before us the pressing issue of race and the equally pressing issue of poverty. It is critical to the credibility of the gospel that we come through on these issues and that we be found as Christians on the right side.

III

To be on the right side there are two caveats that we must heed. First, let's not drift into the habit of merely reacting to other people's initiatives. There is such a thing as being too careful, too cautious. One can study a given proposal to death while the world moves on. When General Pershing was informed that one of his officers was making lots of mistakes he replied, "Yes, but he's making them fast."

I know of two churches of the same denomination in a city not too far from here. Across the years one of these churches tended to be stolid, cautious, exceedingly pensive -- always suspicious of the new. The other, through a succession of creative ministers and board members, was always willing to try something new. Sometimes in a given year, this church would launch ten imaginative programs. Eight of them might fail, but two would usually stick and catch on. Looking at those two churches now, the cautious one is struggling to keep its head above water, the other is thriving and drawing young people from near and far. Robert Louis Stevenson was speaking within the good sense of the gospel when he said: "Acts may be forgiven: not even God can forgive the hanger-back." 3

The second caveat is this: Be on guard not to be intimidated by the critic mentality. The critic can always ask more questions than the doer can answer. We are often reminded of the cleverly invented story of an aged man who set out upon a journey with his young son. At first the father let the youth ride upon the ass which they took with them; but everybody they passed laughed at the foolish old man who let the strong lad ride so comfortably while he walked himself. Then they thought they would try the opposite way, so the youth got down and walked, while the old man mounted in his place and rode. And now he was scolded and railed at more than before, for his laziness and inhumanity to the lad. The result was that both of them rode together; and then the ass became the subject of general pity and sympathy.

What were they to do? They made another attempt to please men and disarm criticism, by both of them walking

and leading the ass behind them, who now had nothing to carry at all. And then they were laughed at for their stupidity in not knowing the right use of an ass. But the mockery and ridicule reached its height, when it appeared that the unfortunate pair was going to carry the ass between them, as a last effort to be right. In the end they came to a wise conclusion, that he who tries to please everybody is a fool, and that a man ought to know his own business best." 3

I commend to you the fascinating story of "The New York Times" written by Gal Talese and bearing the title The Kingdom and the Power. At one point towards the end of that book Talese tells why book critics so seldom become authors themselves. "A critic spends his best years reading other men's words in quiet rooms, refining his own taste, making greater demands on his contemporaries, and most critics have neither the time, nor perhaps the nerve, to be tested themselves. Their taste is possibly too good for their own good." We are free in Jesus Christ. Free to attempt brave new ventures. Free, if need be, to fail and fall short!

* * * * *

"Why was this perfume not sold for thirty pounds and given to the poor?" Jesus is quick to repudiate Judas and identify with Mary. "Why do you trouble this woman? For she hath performed a good action toward me." (John 12:7b)

To live with Jesus Christ is to recover the initiative. He told us that we were to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the leaven of the loaf. It is the business of the salt to penetrate and season. It is the business of light to bid the darkness begone. It is the business of the leaven to get the bread to stand.

What if John McIntyre is right when he says: "The New Testament teaches sin as unbelief--not as immorality--as our inability to believe in our opportunities." 5

Inaction. Action. Reaction. Which word describes you best?

CLOSING PRAYER

Our Father in heaven - forgive us the excessive caution that keeps our noblest impulses from becoming airborne.

Give us to see Thee less as conserver and more as history's forward-moving Lord, and help us to shape our discipleship accordingly.

So secure us in Thy love that no risk may lie beyond our courage.

Through the same - Thy son, our saviour
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Thielicke, Helmut, How Modern Should Theology Be? Appeared in "News-Letter," First Presbyterian Church, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Vol. 14, No. 10, May 25, 1969.
2. Sweazey, George E., Effective Evangelism, p. 24 Harper & Bros., New York 1953.
3. Balfour, Graham, The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson, Vol. 1, p. 191, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1901.
4. Talese, Gay, The Kingdom and the Power, p. 579, Bantam Books, 1966.

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